

Helen Andersen

Heather Bryant

WRIT 155 The Selfie in American Life

05/03/16

### Building the House of Cards: The Role of the Internet in the Growth of the Asexual Community

People define themselves by the communities they are a part of: their hometowns, their favorite sports teams, their schools, and other such things. Sexuality is often also a very important part of someone's identity, especially if they are a minority, and communities devoted to people of certain sexual orientations have been around for a very long time. However, one in particular has only come to prominence with the rise of the Internet: the asexual community. Asexuality as an orientation is defined as a lack of sexual attraction. It is unique in that it is defined not by what gender(s) a person is attracted to, but whether and in what circumstances a person feels attraction at all. For this reason, asexuality is often described as a spectrum consisting of a wide variety of identities that describe patterns of attraction. For example, a demisexual person experiences sexual attraction only to those with whom they already have an emotional bond, and a gray-asexual (or graysexual) person experiences sexual attraction only very rarely.

Information about asexuality as an orientation is all but impossible to find in every day life and popular culture, especially before the Internet gave people a chance to connect to others like them regardless of physical location, and to spread information widely and rapidly. One of the only (brief) mentions of asexuality before the rise of the Internet is as a part of the Kinsey scale. The Kinsey scale, a popular method of quantifying sexuality on a 6-point scale from heterosexuality to homosexuality, had a little known 'X' category. While he never mentioned the

word asexuality, this category was clearly intended to define the people we would today consider asexual (Weinrich, 2014). Aside from Kinsey, however, any mentions of these people are few and far between. This lack of information prevented many asexual people from realizing their own identity, simply because they did not realize it was an option. The formation of an asexual community required the Internet, because it allowed people to realize the legitimacy of asexuality, and to formulate the heretofore nonexistent language necessary to articulate an asexual experience. By connecting people who assumed themselves to be anomalies and allowing language and information to form, normalize, and spread, the Internet allowed a community to come into being for a group of people who previously had none.

Often asexual people assume that their sexualities are some fault rather than a real orientation, which makes it much more difficult for them to seek out others like them. Many asexual people simply don't understand what sexual attraction is, and mistakenly interpret romantic or aesthetic attraction as sexual (Chasin, 2011). Alternately, they interpret their lack of sexual attraction as something malignant. In a recent study about the "coming-out" process for asexual people, researchers Robbins and Low found a number of similar themes in their participants' stories; one of which was that before discovering the term 'asexual', many people believed their lack of attraction to be somehow pathological, some kind of sexual disorder or abnormally low libido (Robbins and Low, 2016). Our society makes it incredibly easy for these kinds of assumptions to prosper. In the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (the DSM), lack of sexual attraction and low libido were classified as disorders up until the DSM-5 in 2015 ("Asexuality history", "Asexuality in the DSM-5", 2015). If an asexual person, confused about their lack of attraction and believing themselves to be sick, were to seek help from a psychiatrist, their fears could likely be validated. Beyond these more official, authoritative

sources, sex and sexuality pervades every aspect of our lives. We are constantly inundated with images of sex, and the often unspoken assumption that everybody desires sex. Because desiring sex is seen as normal, and society lacks a common term or language to describe somebody who did not experience attraction, it is easy for asexual people to dismiss their own experience as an anomaly or defect of some kind. While other orientations had some visibility in the media and common knowledge, even if they were portrayed very negatively, asexual people before the Internet had no way of knowing that other people shared these experiences. Without the Internet allowing more people to have a voice and reach a greater audience, there was no way for asexual people to even realize that they were not in some way broken.

The Internet allows for these people to come to the realization that they are not the only ones who experienced life this way, and it allows them to coin language that has never been seen before and define themselves with it. In the spring of 1997, Zoe O'Reilly posted an article on an online extension of the Tucson newspaper *The Star* entitled "My life as a human amoeba." In her article, she proudly identified herself as asexual and argued for the acknowledgment of people like her. In the comments section, people thank her for writing it and proclaim their own asexual identities. One man, whose name is only given as 'Gary', writes, "Cool! I found someone else who is asexual! I've thought for so many years now that I was the only one; I've never found another, anywhere. (Gary, "My life as an amoeba" 1997)" Gary's sheer joy at discovering that he is not alone in his identity is representative of many asexual people discovering someone like them for the first time, and often, it happens online.

As Gary's comment demonstrates, this article shows the very beginnings of asexual communities: people coming together upon finding others like them. In October of 2000, a Yahoo! Group was created called "Haven for the Human Amoeba": this was one of the very first

places designated specifically for asexual people. HHA functioned as an email group, and also had a chat room, allowing for conversations amongst asexual people that formerly were impossible (“Haven For the Human Amoeba”). At last, there was one central place where people who did not experience sexual attraction could come together to discuss their experiences. Before HHA, asexual people were scattered across the globe, often isolated. Even things like Zoe O’Reilly’s article were small and local. While HHA still had its shortcomings—for one, in order to find the group people had to actively search for asexuality, making it inaccessible to those who had never heard of the term—it allowed asexual people to come together on a scale previously unseen.

The community, at this time, was still trying to define its own language. Lack of sexual attraction was widely accepted as part of asexuality, but what about the act of sex itself? What about romantic attraction? Amongst the people in the HHA, there were three main approaches. The first, calling themselves antisexuals, regarded asexuality as a moral state. They viewed themselves as morally superior for not having sex in their lives, and saw asexuality as something to be aspired to. While other asexual movements generally made a point of distinguishing between asexuality as an orientation and celibacy as a choice, antisexuals did not. The second movement, which came to be known as the nonlibidoists, were much more hard-line about the definition of asexuality. They advocated for asexuality to only include people who not only didn’t experience sexual attraction, but also romantic attraction and arousal. The nonlibidoists eventually split off and created their own site, at first called the “Official Asexual Society” and then later renamed the “Official Nonlibidoist Society”; in order to participate in the site, potential users had to take a test created by the site founder. The site has since shut down as popular sentiment in the community shifted away from such hard-line ideas of who the term asexual

applies to. The third movement was focused more on the support of asexual people than strictly defining who is and is not asexual. Consisting primarily of queer activists, the proponents of this viewpoint saw asexual as a flexible identity that is used as a tool of self-exploration rather than a label. One of the leaders of this last movement, David Jay, went on to create the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (“Haven for the Human Amoeba”).

The creation of the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network in 2001, commonly known as AVEN, led to the asexual community as it exists today. Originally simply a post giving the definition of asexuality and a request for people who feel the same way to email the creator, David Jay, AVEN quickly grew to fulfill the needs of the community. While Haven for the Human Amoeba allowed asexual people to communicate with each other, its format made conversations unwieldy, and prevented the community from pursuing more than one line of discussion at a time. As an email chain, only one chain of conversation was possible, and often became confusing. As the membership grew, the community needed a better way to facilitate discussion and community-building. AVEN filled this need with a forum that allowed multiple conversations at once, and its membership grew rapidly. AVEN also was easier to find than the Haven for the Human Amoeba; its domain name, [asexuality.org](http://asexuality.org), allowed people searching for asexuality to locate it much easier and faster than HHA (“Asexual history”).

Other asexual communities sprung up as well, including communities on the popular blogging platform LiveJournal, each with its own particular mission and definition for asexuality. One, the LiveJournal Asexuality Community, paired with AVEN creator in 2002 to create the original FAQ for the AVEN site, which today is one of the most popular places for the confused and curious to find information about asexuality. AVEN remained one of the most influential asexual communities; amongst its userbase symbols for asexuality like the triangle, now no

longer in use, was first developed as a symbol for asexuality. The black rings worn on the middle finger to indicate that a person is asexual and the popular association of asexual people with cake (coming from the joke that asexual people prefer cake over sex) originated in the AVEN forums (“Asexual history”). Terms like “ace” as a more casual word for asexual became popular. Words for identities like demisexual and gray-asexual were coined by AVEN users as they discussed their individual experiences (“The development of gray asexuality and demisexuality as identity terms”). In 2010, AVEN users spearheaded an effort to create a pride flag for asexuality. While they enlisted the help of other asexual communities beyond AVEN, it was also an AVEN user with the handle ‘standup’ that designed the flag that was eventually voted on and is now in popular use. The flag has four horizontal stripes: black, gray, white, and purple. The black stands for asexuality, the gray for gray-asexuality and demisexuality, the white for non-asexual partners and allies, and the purple for community (“The Asexuality Flag” 2012). At last, the community had a way to publicly proclaim their pride in their identity, something that before the Internet and AVEN would have seemed like an unattainable ideal.

Even with the growth of AVEN and other communities online, it was still difficult for those who did not realize they were asexual to learn about the orientation. In order to find most of these communities, such as the Haven for the Human Amoeba or the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network, one had to use search engines to look for asexuality. Most of AVEN’s traffic comes from people either directly typing in the website’s address or by searching “asexuality.” This method of finding the site required someone to already have determined that their orientation could be defined as the lack of sexuality, and to feel compelled to type in the term online (Jay 2003). People who did not experience sexual attraction but didn’t have the word to articulate their experience or else just had never come to the realization that their sexuality

was different from other people's would not search asexuality, and would likely not find the various asexual communities that had begun springing up online. This is where the move to social media comes in.

Social media allowed for the rapid spread of the asexual community in a way that hubs such as Haven for the Human Amoeba and the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network couldn't. Social media allowed for information about asexuality to spread rapidly, and, more importantly, to reach people to whom it would never occur to type "asexuality" into a search engine. The greatest boon social media gave to the asexual community was its popularity: people, including asexual people who had never heard the term, were already there, using these sites. When people began posting videos about asexuality on YouTube, or writing blog posts about it on Tumblr, or LiveJournal, or posting information about it on Facebook, others could see it without needing to actively search it out.

As part of my research, I posted an online survey on a Facebook group for asexual students on Wellesley's campus, along with a post asking people to help me by answering the questions anonymously. The survey contained only a few questions, asking about the subject's identity, experience with the asexuality and the asexual community, and the role social media played in the subject's experiences. Nine people responded. Seven of the nine had first heard the term asexuality on the Internet, one had forgotten, and only one had heard the term from someone offline. When about social media, the students often mentioned the popular blogging platform Tumblr specifically. Tumblr, with its ease of communication and culture of embracing those who are marginalized, allowed more and more people to be exposed to the concept of asexuality. More importantly, it reassured asexual people that they were okay. It is not uncommon, especially if you follow as many asexual blogs as I do, to come across bright,

colorful graphics specifically and directly telling asexual people they are valid, and they are not broken. One of the students said about Tumblr:

*I feel like ace kids tend to go through this same awful feeling of being so alone and feeling broken and unwanted just because we don't want what we are "supposed to want." The Internet, primarily Tumblr, changed that. Tumblr is so good at reassuring sprouting aces that they aren't alone and there is nothing wrong with them, and I needed that.*

AVEN and other communities like it allowed for asexual people to first come together and develop a common language so that they could talk about asexuality properly, and without those communities there would be no asexual community. They created the language and the sense of pride and legitimacy that allowed people to carry this information over to the social media sites that they were already using, and share it with people there. This migration of the asexuality community away from using not only sites dedicated to asexual people but to carving out spaces for themselves on more popular websites allowed for the rapid growth of the community, and for an increase in visibility that allowed many people to realize an identity that had previously been denied them for lack of information.

The formation of an asexual community required the growth of the Internet because of the unique difficulties in realizing and articulating an asexual experience. Asexual people existed long before Zoe O'Reilly's 1997 article about her life, but were often pathologized or dismissed by not only the people around the asexual person but that person themselves. With no information popularly available telling people that being asexual was even an option, many asexual people simply did not realize it to be. The Internet allowed these people to find each other, to realize that they are not broken or somehow sick, and to get this information out to

those who need it. The asexual community is still growing, and still faces problems; many people outside of it still have never heard of asexuality, or else don't believe it exists. Asexual people are often excluded from queer spaces, and are seen as inhuman or heartless.

Nevertheless, more and more people are finding these terms and identifying with them. Of the students I surveyed, only two had identified on the asexual spectrum for more than two years. This information is still new, and still finding its way to those who need it. Just this year, on the Wellesley campus, a new student organization was founded for asexual students. The Wildcards began as a closed Facebook group called "Wellesley College Aces" with little purpose but to give aces on campus a place to be recognized, and maybe post an interesting article on the rare occasion a news source wrote about the topic. Over time, and after a few failed attempts at mobilizing and creating a real org, the group eventually became renamed Wildcards and now meets weekly. While there is a substantial ace population on the Wellesley campus, they would not have come together as a community without social media. All over the world, asexual communities owe their existence to the Internet, and its incredible power to bring people together and give a voice to the voiceless.

## Works Cited

- "Asexual history." *AVENwiki*. AVEN, n.d. Web. 19 Apr. 2016.
- "The Asexuality Flag." *Asexuality Archive*. N.p., 20 Feb. 2012. Web. 26 Apr. 2016.
- "Asexuality in the DSM-5." *Asexuality Archive*. N.p., 20 Oct. 2015. Web. 26 Apr. 2016.
- Chasin, CJ DeLuzio. "Theoretical Issues in the Study of Asexuality." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 40.4 (2011): 713-23. Web.
- "The Development of Gray Asexuality and Demisexuality as Identity Terms." *Critique of Popular Reason*. N.p., 08 May 2013. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.
- "Haven for the Human Amoeba." *AVENwiki*. AVEN, n.d. Web. 19 Apr. 2016.
- Jay, David. "The Computer in the Closet – Online Collective Identity Formation." *AVEN*. AVEN, 13 May 2003. Web. 11 Apr. 2016.
- O'Reilly, Zoe. "My Life as an Amoeba." *StarNet Dispatches* 30 May 1997: n. pag. Web. 19 Apr. 2016.
- <<http://web.archive.org/web/20030210212218/http://dispatches.azstarnet.com/zoe/amoeba.htm>>.
- Robbins, Nicolette K., Kathryn Graff Low, and Anna N. Query. "A Qualitative Exploration of the "Coming Out" Process for Asexual Individuals." *Arch Sex Behav Archives of Sexual Behavior* 45.3 (2015): 751-60. Web.
- Weinrich, James D. "Notes On The Kinsey Scale." *Journal Of Bisexuality* 14.3/4 (2014): 333-340. *LGBT Life with Full Text*. Web. 11 Apr. 2016.